

The Black Worcester Pear

Wade Muggleton

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Living and working in Worcestershire it is hard to escape the imagery of the Black Pear, it is on the county coat of arms, the cricket club badge, was until recently the rugby club badge. All ways round the Pear and Worcester seem to have an inseparable association. It is even said that the Worcestershire bowman who fought at Agincourt in 1415 had images of pears emblazoned on their standard.

About 25 years ago the Worcestershire County Council (WCC) in conjunction with Pershore College ran an initiative selling young black pear trees to counter concerns they were becoming endangered, as a result several hundred young Black Pear Trees have been planted around the county in the last couple of decades or so, meaning that the sight of the dark reddish fruit hanging on the trees into November is no longer such a rare sight.

Early in 2015 I was contacted by Paul Labous, a horticultural lecturer at Shuttleworth Agricultural College in Bedfordshire. He is researching the historic Warden Pear of Warden Abbey in Bedfordshire. It is claimed by some that the Bedford Warden and the Black Worcester are one and the same; the pears having been bought to Worcester by medieval monks. Paul was keen to investigate this so he arranged a day to come over and collect some samples. It was only whilst touring round a few known trees that we made a potentially interesting discovery that not all Black Worcesters are the same.

Which begs a question: which is the true Black Worcester or are there just simply more than one type?

All the young trees I know of are the same and most likely the result of the aforementioned scheme when WCC and Pershore College were selling young trees. However perhaps the best known supposed Black Worcester is the one in Cripplegate park (01) in Worcester City Centre which has a plaque (02) commemorating its planting in 1932 by then Prince of Wales and future King Edward. However on closer inspection this appears to be distinctly different from the Worcester Black Pear trees sold from contemporary nurseries. So the historic Cripplegate Worcester Black appears to one version of the Black Pear (03) whilst what all the young trees produce a seemingly different version (04). I have found the Cripplegate type on three other trees in the Martley area (05 & 06)); all are older trees whilst I have only found one old tree of the more common type that I will refer to as the Worcester Woods Type (07). On storage they become even more visually distinct shown in 08 with Martley type on the left, Worcester Woods on the right.



01. Perhaps the most famous Worcester Black in Cripplegate Park planted in 1932



02. The Cripplegate plaque is evidence that someone clearly believed that in 1932 this was a Worcester Black

Where the graft wood for the WCC/Pershore college initiative originated I have been unable to discover, equally the tree Edward planted in the park was clearly believed to be the Worcester Black at that time. Well, at least if the future King was planting it, you'd like to think they'd get it right! The national collection at Brogdale appears to have the Worcester Woods type as their specimen of supposed Worcester Black.



03. Fruit from the Cripplegate tree in October 2015



04. The more common Worcester Black, the Worcester Woods type.



05. The trees in the Martley Area produce the same fruit as the Cripplegate tree, the Martley type.



06. Anatomical detail of the Martley type



07. Anatomical detail of the Worcester Woods type.



08. On storage they become even more visually distinct

This all casts an interesting light on the view there is only one type of Warden pear and that the Bedford and Worcester are one and the same.

Today the Warden has been taken to mean a type of large, hard culinary pear that never truly ripens and so has to be cooked. Alongside the Worcester Black are such varieties as Uvedale St Germain, Catillac and Bellissime de Hiver, all distinctly different but all are large cooking pears.

However, doing some historical digging reveals there were once a great variety of Warden type Pears, many of which have now seemingly become lost. In his 1676 *Flora, Ceres & Pomona* in volume 3 Nurseryman John Rea of Kinlet, Shropshire, lists the following as all very good pears to bake:

Painted Pear
 Tunip Pear
 Canterbury Pear
 Quince Pear
 French Warden
 Spanish Warden
 Great Warden
 Parkinson's Warden
 Red Warden
 White Warden
 Bell Pear
 Black Pear of Worcester

Whilst at the same period London nurseryman George Ricketts offered in 1667 a Red and a White Worcester as well as three types of Warden pear. Although Forsyth (1810) and Hogg (1884) suggest that the Black Worcester was the original Warden Pear.

So for now the Worcester Black appears to have at least two pretenders to the crown, which is the real one? Or are they similar or could one be a sport of the other ???

There is of course the possibility of seedling pears being that bit different and so leading to several different types. Pears are a much under studied subject and I am not aware that any work has been done on how true or diverse seedling pears can be; in the case of apples seedling trees can produce vastly different fruit to their parents, due to the genetic diversity and random nature of cross pollination in the genus *Malus*.

Only DNA testing will prove how closely related or how different they are. Paul Labous is currently attempting to get funding to do such testing, so it's work in progress,

Foot note – the use of the terms Worcester Blacks and Black Worcesters seems to be equally split with some references using one and others the other. For all intents and purposes they mean the same thing.

References

Forsyth, W. 1810. *Treatise on the Culture & Management of Fruit Trees*. London press
 Hogg, R. 1884. *The Fruit Manual*. Langford press
 Morgan, J, 2015. *The book of Pears*. Ebury Press
 Rea, J. 1676. *Flora, Ceres & Pomona*. George Marriott



The old Worcestershire Coat of Arms.

Images

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